

# TRANSOM ISSUE 8: HERSELF LIKE ME

[Wherein we go on smiting limes]



Lauren Haldeman  
Victorian Wolf

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## A Conversation with translator Luke Hollis

### **Transom:**

When translating ancient texts, some translators try to use language that evokes ancientness, while others attempt to make that writer sound contemporary to our ears. You seem to take a middle path with your casual use of contractions and elevated language like “Hail, dread Hekate.” How did the ancientness of these texts influence your translation decisions?

### **Hollis:**

Perhaps no Hellenistic poet is so keenly strategic and intentional with dialect as Theocritus. In the multiplicities and variations of dialect throughout his work, there exist the paradoxes and juxtapositions that lie at the heart of Theocritus’s inventiveness in genre that stems from a complex relationship with Homer predominantly and the Archaic tradition more generally. This is what makes Theocritus fascinating to me. One of Theocritus’s primary modern editors, A. S. F. Gow (to whom my translation owes much), divided Theocritus’s poetry into five distinct dialectical groups, the largest of which is “genuine” Doric, for which Theocritus is most well known, and the remainder contain elements of the Epic, Ionic, and Aeolic dialects. Classicist Gianfranco Fabiano described the intricacies of Theocritus’s language as such: “What seems chiefly to characterise Theocritus’ poetic language is the instability of the system at every level, from the least phonetic unity, which always enjoys a considerable autonomy inside the changeable convention of the dialect, to the structure of the Idylls as complex syntheses of different literary genres . . . . This tension of opposite elements in words and sentences and also in two sentences in succession is the dynamic device of composition according to which almost every idyll is built up.” The skillful shifts in register and diction are essential to the subtext of the Idylls that comes to be known as the pastoral mode and genre.

This was where the impetus for my translation of Theocritus began. Having grown up in a small town in rural Nebraska, I resonated with the landscape and speakers of Theocritus. His scientific and metaphoric interest in botany and husbandry, his acknowledgment and defiance of class consciousness, and his expansive use of dialect and language all vividly describe my experience of the American Midwest and continue to inform my understanding of the widely varied diction and language used by the residents of my hometown. Similarly, Fabiano writes of Theocritus, “[T]he Doric element alone is already so differentiated that it makes up an unlimited reserve of expression . . . . Theocritus’ language, no matter what the dialect, is almost always made dynamic in a series of oppositions between Homerisms and rough Doric forms, high artificiality and colloquialisms, realism in some details and refusal of a consistent realistic poetics, personal tone and literary stimuli.” The primary goal for my translation was to render Theocritus in just such precisely textured shifts of dialect and language, which explore the amalgamation of vocabularies, conventions, and colloquialisms that compose what I’ve come to understand as the Midwestern vernacular.

Particularly for Idyll II, in which the sorceress, Simaetha, is rushed and abbreviated in one moment and elevated summoning the goddess for her spell in the next, abrupt shifts in register became the rule instead of anomaly. As critic Anne Duncan notes here, Simaetha represents a poetic *topoi* of the poet enchanting the audience as the “magician chants a spell or administers a drug,” and begs to be compared with other epic characters such as Medea, Circe, and the Sirens. Throughout her love spell, however, a panoply of emotions possess Simaetha, including fear, lust, annoyance, hope, greed, and hate, and as a result, her monologue twists rapidly in tone and subject. The religious diction mentioned in the question is taken from hours upon hours of sermons I listened to in my youth while sketching superheroes on church bulletins.

**Transom:**

In your translation of Horace's "To Visiting Faunus," you made the decision to condense Horace's four-line stanzas into three. What were you hoping to achieve with this choice, and did you have to sacrifice anything from the original in pursuit of that goal?

**Hollis:**

To try to translate what Horace's Sapphics (the meter of Odes 3.18) are in Latin to a direct correspondence of Sapphics in English would perhaps distract more as artifice instead of enhancing the essential qualities of the original language. Certainly there is always a sacrifice in creating a separate entity, the translation that the original gave birth to and which reflects its qualities. But I defer to Benjamin in this respect: he writes, "Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel . . . . A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully." In not attempting to recreate the meter of Horace's Sapphics in English, I chose tercets because I find the stanza resourceful for its flexibility and balance (Hollander wrote it best, describing tercets as "—Playful, like couplets that get out of hand— / Of lines that fly far and come back to land" ). We don't have the clean, English-hymn-like exit that a quatrain makes, but we have a crafted, roughly accentual music that suits Faunus kissing young goatkids and lambs as much as the ditch digger pounding the earth in his clumsy dance. I have, however, retained the balanced structure of the poem with four stanzas, as Heinz, Nisbet, and Rudd comment, in which the first two stanzas address Faunus and speak of a sacrifice to him and the last two stanzas portray the festival in which he is honored.

**Transom:**

In submitting these poems, you told us that you traveled to rural Sicily to research local agricultural practices for your translation of Theocritus. Given that the pastoral tradition often idealizes the activities of shepherds and farmers, why was it important for you to get a sense of the “real lives” of the inhabitants of this landscape?

**Hollis:**

I would not have been able to translate Theocritus without having lived in rural Sicily and Syracuse. Though the landscape has changed vastly from Theocritus’s era, my experience in Aidone, a small town not much bigger than my hometown, offered me an essential perspective on the Idylls, perhaps best described in Frost’s “backward motion toward the source / Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in / The tribute of the current to the source.” In this sense, I am heavily indebted to Richard Hunter and Malcolm Bell among others for initiating my historical and archaeological understanding of Theocritus’s context and the diverse and complex Hellenistic aesthetic. I excavated and visited artifacts contemporary to Theocritus in Sicily’s expansive museums and hope to reflect these objects’ beauty, fascination with the natural world, concern with workers and their industries, and interest in everyday people that is likely a byproduct of the decline of the city-state and, as Barbara Hughes Fowler notes, a turn to the individualistic philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism. In my rendering of Theocritus’s landscape and characters, these images of goats, lyres, fishermen, chariots, goddesses, cyclopes, and the harsh midday sunlight registered as indispensable phantoms in my imagination when I considered the Idylls. I hope that my translation of the Idylls will render these figures as vividly and profoundly as I experienced them—as they come into the guise of my own tradition and language in the American Midwest.

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from "The Witch," Idylls II

"—Where're the bay leaves? Grab them, Thessi.  
And where's my love tonic? Wreathe the cauldron  
with scarlet-dyed ram's wool since with this fire  
I'll bewitch my cruel lover, who's not dropped by  
my house in twelve unending days, the prick.  
Ignorant of whether I'm living or already dead,  
he hasn't knocked on my door, that incorrigible man.  
Eros and Aphrodite must've sparked the flame  
for another maiden, kindling his whimsical heart.

In the morning, I'll march to Timagetus's gym  
where I'll confront him for grieving my mind like this.  
But now, I'll scorch him with my dark fire charms.

Radiant Moon, haunt us: for to you, phantom,  
I chant my soft spells, and to Hekate of the earth,  
who, striding from tombs and black blood of the dead,  
makes dogs bristle and whine. Hail, dread Hekate,  
follow me till the end—and imbue these incantations  
not less than Circe's, Medea's, or blonde Permedeae's.

Spin my man, jinxed wheel, spin my man back home.

First, barley-heads should smolder in the embers.  
Toss them on, Thess. Fool, where's your mind wandering?  
You think this a farce, intolerable girl, and me, a jest!  
Toss them on now, reciting 'I spread Delphis's bones.'

Spin my man, jinxed wheel, spin my man back home.

Delphis has stung me. Against him, I light these bays.  
As the leaves flare suddenly into crackling flame  
so we can't even make out their ashes beneath the glow,  
thus Delphis's flesh should wither in a searing blaze.

Spin my man, jinxed wheel, spin my man back home.

Next I'll burn corn husks: Artemis, you can command  
the black, adamantine gates of Hades and all unyielding—  
—hush. Thess, the dogs growl and yelp through town.  
The goddess is in the crossroads—quick! Send her off!

Spin my man, jinxed wheel, spin my man back home.

Here, the sea's smooth. The soft breezes are quelled  
—but this rage gripping my heart will not wane away.  
A black frenzy seethes in my marrow at that man,  
that bastard who took me not as his wife—but took me.

Spin my man, jinxed wheel, spin my man back home.

Just as channeling the goddess, I melt this wax doll,  
so may Delphis of Myndus grow languid in his desire.  
As Aphrodite herself whirls the bronze bull-roarer,  
so may he turn himself, witless, before these doors.

Spin my man, jinxed wheel, spin my man back home.

I pour three libations, Mistress. Three times I chant,  
'Whether a woman or man rests warm beside him now,  
may he utterly forget them so much as on Dia isle  
they say Theseus forgot the sleek-haired Ariadne!'

Delphis has stung me. Against him, I light these bays.  
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Spin my man, jinxed wheel, spin my man back home.

Coltsfoot's a rare weed in Arcadia that deranges  
foals and their swift mares tearing over the broad hills.  
Just so may I see Delphis, oil-slicked from the gym,  
roused like them, forcing himself through my gates.

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πᾶ μοι ταὶ δάφναι; φέρε Θεστυλί: πᾶ δὲ τὰ φίλτρα;  
στέψον τὰν κελέβαν φοινικέω οἶος ἀώτῳ,  
ὡς τὸν ἐμὸν βαρὺν εὔντα φίλον καταθύσομαι ἄνδρα,  
ὄς μοι δωδεκαταῖος ἀφ' ᾧ τάλας οὐδέποθ' ἵκει,  
οὐδ' ἔγνω πότερον τεθνάκαμες ἢ ζοοὶ εἰμές.  
οὐδὲ θύρας ἄραξεν ἀνάρσιος. ἦ ῥά οἱ ἀλλᾶ  
ὤχετ' ἔχων ὅ τ' Ἔρωσ ταχινὰς φρένας ἅ τ' Ἀφροδίτα;  
βασεῦμαι ποτὶ τὰν Τιμαγήτοιο παλαίστραν  
αὔριον, ὡς νιν ἴδω, καὶ μέμψομαι οἷά με ποιεῖ.  
νῦν δέ νιν ἐκ θυέων καταθύσομαι. ἀλλὰ Σελάνα,  
φαῖνε καλόν: τιν γὰρ ποταεῖσομαι ἄσυχᾶ, δαῖμον,  
τᾶ χθονία θ' Ἐκάτα, τὰν καὶ σκύλακες τρομέοντι  
ἐρχομένην νεκύων ἀνά τ' ἠρία καὶ μέλαν αἶμα.  
χαῖρ' Ἐκάτα δασπλῆτι, καὶ ἐς τέλος ἄμμιν ὀπάδει.  
φάρμακα ταῦτ' ἔρδοισα χερεῖονα μήτέ τι Κίρκης  
μήτέ τι Μηδείας μήτε ξανθᾶς Περιμήδας.  
Ἰυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τῆνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.  
ἄλφιτά τοι πρᾶτον πυρὶ τάκεται: ἀλλ' ἐπίπασσε  
Θεστυλί. δειλαία, πᾶ τὰς φρένας ἐκπεπότασαι;  
ἦ ῥά γε τρισμυσαρὰ καὶ τιν ἐπίχαρμα τέτυγμα;  
πάσσο ἅμα καὶ λέγε ταῦτα: 'τὰ Δέλφιδος ὅστία πάσσω.'  
Ἰυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τῆνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.  
Δέλφιδος ἐμὸν ἀνίασεν: ἐγὼ δ' ἐπὶ Δέλφιδι δάφναν  
αἶθω: χῶς αὐτὰ λακεῖ μέγα καππυρίσασα  
κῆξαπίνας ἄφθη, κούδὲ σποδὸν εἶδομες αὐτᾶς,  
οὔτῳ τοι καὶ Δέλφιδος ἐνὶ φλογὶ σάρκ' ἀμαθύνει.  
Ἰυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τῆνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.

ὡς τοῦτον τὸν κηρὸν ἐγὼ σὺν δαίμονι τάκω,  
ὡς τάκοιθ' ὑπὲρ ἔρωτος ὁ Μύνδιος αὐτίκα Δέλφισ.  
χῶς δινεῖθ' ὄδε ῥόμβος ὁ χάλκεος ἐξ Ἀφροδίτας,  
ὡς τήνος δινοῖτο ποθ' ἀμετέραισι θύραισιν.  
Ἴυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τήνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.  
νῦν θυσῶ τὰ πίτυρα. τὸ δ' Ἄρτεμι καὶ τὸν ἐν Ἄϊδα  
κινήσαις ἀδάμαντα καὶ εἴ τί περ ἀσφαλὲς ἄλλο.  
Θεστυλί, ταὶ κύνες ἄμμιν ἀνὰ πτόλιν ὠρύονται.  
ἀ θεὸς ἐν τριόδοισι: τὸ χαλκίον ὡς τάχος ἄχει.  
Ἴυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τήνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.  
ἠνίδε σιγῆ μὲν πόντος, σιγῶντι δ' ἀῆται:  
ἀ δ' ἐμὰ οὐ σιγῆ στέρνων ἔντοσθεν ἀνία,  
ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τήνῳ πᾶσα καταίθομαι, ὅς με τάλαιναν  
ἀντὶ γυναικὸς ἔθηκε κακὰν καὶ ἀπάρθενον ἦμεν.  
Ἴυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τήνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.  
ἐς τρὶς ἀποσπένδω καὶ τρὶς τάδε πότνια φωνέω:  
εἴτε γυνὰ τήνῳ παρακέκλιται εἴτε καὶ ἀνήρ,  
τόσσον ἔχοι λάθας, ὅσσόν ποκα Θησέα φαντὶ  
ἐν Δία λασθῆμεν εὐπλοκάμῳ Ἀριάδνας.  
Ἴυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τήνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.  
ἵππομανὲς φυτόν ἐστι παρ' Ἀρκάσι: τῷ δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσαι  
καὶ πῶλοι μαίνονται ἀν' ὥρεα καὶ θοαὶ ἵπποι.  
ὡς καὶ Δέλφιν ἴδοιμι, καὶ ἐς τόδε δῶμα περάσαι  
μαιομένῳ ἴκελος λιπαρᾶς ἔκτοσθε παλαίστρας.

## To Visiting Faunus, Carmina III. 18

Faunus, you heartthrob of the flighty Nymphs,  
saunter onto my mild land, my summery hills,  
and traipse off having kissed each of my new lambs.

For you a soft-whiskered goatkid's butchered  
at year's end, wine's lush in the mixing-bowl  
—that sweet Venus!—and a relic altar fumes.

During your harvest-time feast, cattle lope free  
on drying, coppery meadows. The decadent town  
dawdles in warm pastures with their lolling cows.

The timberwolf shambles past tranquil ewes,  
groves scatter gold, and the ditch-digger revels,  
pounding his tyrant, the earth, in a clumsy dance.

\*

Faune, Nympharum fugientum amator,  
per meos finis et aprica rura  
lenis incedas, abeasque parvis  
aequus alumnis,

si tener pleno cadit haedus anno  
larga nec desunt Veneris sodali  
vina creterrae, vetus ara multo  
fumat odore.

ludit herboso pecus omne campo,  
cum tibi nonae redeunt Decembres;  
festus in pratis vacat otioso  
cum bove pagus;

inter audacis lupus errat agnos,  
spargit agrestis tibi silva frondes,  
gaudet invisam pepulisse fossor  
ter pede terram.

### **Translation Feature: Horace and Theocritus**

Horace (issue 8) lived from 65 BCE to 8 BCE, and was the leading Roman poet of his time.

Theocritus (issue 8) lived in the third century BCE and is credited with inventing ancient Greek bucolic poetry.

Luke Hollis (issue 8), received an MFA from the University of Oregon, and his poetry and translations have appeared in the Birmingham Poetry Review, JMWW, Construction Literary Magazine, Plainsongs, and elsewhere. He has received numerous awards for his work, including the Miriam McFall Starlin Award, Irby F. Wood Prize, and Nebraska Writing Project Award and is currently an editor at Construction. He was born and raised in Geneva, Nebraska. Find more of his work at [lukehollis.org](http://lukehollis.org).

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**[a return]**

a return  
to glint work  
rings set aside  
flour in hair  
a return to  
kitchen towel sky  
stuffed in a  
drawer handle  
an hourglass  
of anything  
open window  
wayward finch  
the room turned  
upside down  
to catch it

Jeff Downey (issue 8) lives in Bangor, Maine where he helps curate the Norumbega Reading Series. Some other recent poems of his have been published in Cutbank, Thermos, and Parcel.

**Transom:**

This struck us as a poem of inversions: the hourglass and the kitchen seem to turn upside down to “catch” the “wayward finch.” In what way is inversion like return?

**Downey:**

That’s a good question. Some things that cross my mind...

Sleep is an inversion like return. Swimming too. Getting a baby to smile. The migration of birds. To work a recipe from memory. Convalescence.

Maybe the concept of return itself is just an illusion, selfhood on its axis.

That paradox in life that seems to be the necessity of knowing a thing by what it is not, when it is not, where it is not. Our sense of beauty, sense of imagination, sense of home, these things are just measurements, soundings we take, of our comings and goings. You leave home to know home. But then by way of return it's not the same thing anymore, or you're not the same thing anymore, which is how you come to know it in the first place.

How does the Odyssey open, something like, “Sing to me of the man of many turns.”

I return to my desk. I trick myself into writing.

That when the prefixes drop away, there's that connection at the heart of the words, verse and turn.

**Transom:**

In a traditional poem of praise, aspects of the beloved, like “hair” would be given celestial equivalents, but in your piece, “flour” replaces the stars we expect. Likewise, the sky is compared to a “kitchen towel.” What is the relationship of this poem to domesticity?

**Downey:**

I think the poem got started with me thinking about the moments when my wife and I are without our rings on a daily basis. Like I remove my wedding ring when I go swimming over my lunch hour. And she’s a physician, so most of the time at work, if she’s got gloves on, she can’t wear her ring. And then cooking anything messy is a kind of moment of disbanding together. The poem maybe started as a kind of song about the silly symbolic abandon of this. Not sure what other insight I have about it on the domestic front. David Bartone asks in a poem, “Why would you write a hundred poems for a lover and not for your home together?” I like that thought. The former, a type of poem in praise of another, the latter a poem in praise of one another. We build these understandings. To know through love by being known. I remember one winter I got in a snowball fight with some friends. I was throwing snowballs out of the doorway of my apartment and my wedding ring must have slipped from my finger because my fingers were colder and smaller, and anyway we all came in and were laughing about the snowball fight and I felt at my hand and started freaking out. I was desperately shoveling through snow outside in the middle of the night when one of my friends sort of revisited the snowball fight in her head and remembered hearing an out-of-place ding in the middle of it and inferred that the ring must have hit something metallic, and sure enough we found it under the baseboard heater, actually inside the living room. It was a great heroic moment.

## Icons

I touch the very tips of my ring finger and thumb together because I see Jesus doing it in a painting. A girl curtsies in front of a carved wooden altar and her face is so calm she looks like she is asleep. There is a perfect pink kiss on the glass of the icon of John the Baptist and next to it is the skull of Saint Ionnais. I touch it with the tip of my pointer finger and it is softer than I expect it to be. People have left little gifts in front of the paintings. One is a stopped watch. I try to pray.

There is the body of a saint in a silver tomb and a woman whispers with her lips touching it. Mary is called the unfading rose. She motions to her son. In the ocean I step on a sea urchin and parts of it stay inside my skin. Still sitting in the water I dig them out with a needle. One is longer than I expect and when it slides out a ribbon of blood follows.

The girl who was curtsyng in the church wears a white bathing suit and laughs brightly. On the ferry I sleep on a bench with sunglasses on. A girl I loved sends me a letter to say that she is no longer alive.

I write out Prometheus brings fire to the good humans in Ancient Greek. I stop myself from crying three times. I touch the tips of my fingers together and think quietly of the color blue. Someone complains. Someone else smiles at their own disappointment. Sometimes Jesus holds the rose in front of his mother's face. Sometimes she kisses him sweetly.

Once in awhile she can't see where he is, but we can.

Her arms are up and she touches her ring finger to her thumb and Jesus is inside her, sleeping in a bright white circle.

Chelsey Weber-Smith (issue 8) is a recent graduate of the University of Virginia's MFA program in poetry. She also writes country music and rambles around the United States. She has written and self-published two chapbooks, a travel memoir, and two full-length folk/country albums. She currently lives in Seattle.

**Transom:**

Your poem, "Icons" presents us with images of surprising permeability. The poem seems to describe colliding worlds: the religious and the sensual, the concrete and the abstract. Does the action of touch cause these worlds to meet, or does touching help us recognize the collisions that are already happening?

**Weber-Smith:**

I wish I knew! I think that touch, along with color, are small meditations that bring us an immediacy of life when we are vulnerable to it. Touch can be a sudden awareness to, or often, a compulsive reaction from moments of experiential beauty. God, to me, is more that bright life than anything else, those moments when everything is very real. I find it in small things that cut through to my heart when I am open to them coming in.

## Augur of Advent

These woods breathe a second genesis of heat & damp a second genesis of  
flesh

abraded torn stung bitten burnt  
cut contused & concussed

a second genesis of blood to flow into wounds a nail shall sing & call resin to  
heal

when the bark & cambium is broken a sternum of pine will rise into this trace  
of a seam

& I whelp with falter of a chest

hold these limbs & shake against breath to come again no more against  
water

condensed on a bag around my heart a friction shall sing & shall mone  
forlain against bone

as these woods breathe a second genesis a son to reflect father or clouter  
& drip viscous streams down a branch

until his body is born from a vein of manna falling as winged seeds &  
occlusions of amber.

Brent House (issue 8), an editor for *The Gulf Stream: Poems of the Gulf Coast* and a contributing editor for *The Tusculum Review*, is a native of Nacaise, Mississippi, where he raised cattle and watermelons on his family's farm. Slash Pine Press published his first collection, *The Saw Year Prophecies*, and his poems have appeared in journals such as *Colorado Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Journal*, and *Third Coast*. New poems are forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review* and elsewhere.

**Transom:**

The "second genesis" seems to presuppose a broken world that can be "healed" through natural means, such as "resin." And yet, this rebirth is also violent. Should we look forward to the advent being augured here?

**House:**

My son, named after my father, at three weeks of age, bore all the scars I remember my father bringing home in his sixty-sixth year. The long line from joining of clavicles to opening of sternum is born on one chest, as it was born on the other. When I was a son, I feared for my father, and, now, as a father, I fear for my son.

Advent, in my mind, inspires fear. Perhaps I heard too many Southern preachers sermonize of Christ born to die, but I fear birth—I fear birth as I fear death. I fear (for) Jesus in the manger as much as I fear (for) Jesus on the cross.

I do love the woods where we lay born & dead. They heal, yes, and they hold us in our most vulnerable moments. Even still, to be healed (or born again) by nature is to be brought toward death, as insect occluded in resin, as heart filleted by scapel, and as child in womb.

**Transom:**

In a poem about primal energy, you've chosen and arranged your language with corresponding force. Could you tell us about your composition process?

**House:**

Let me say, "As a poet of the twenty-first century, I want to hold the line as the basic form of poetry, while simultaneously expanding the line to its fullest textual potential.

Or, let me say, "I spent years of my childhood following my father around our family farm, and I know the barbed wire has to be pulled tight from both ends to build a strong fence."

Or, let me say, "Two men will honor my life, and they will never meet. I stand between them, their son and father."

## Uselessness

starving the raccoon  
returned nightly to eat  
my landlord's costly  
blue japanese koi

in the tiny backyard pond  
the mother swollen  
soon to birth I watched her  
shift above her shadow cast

by a citronella flame  
and she was enough  
for herself like me  
thankfully placed

too close to the ground  
to be truly noted or fall

Dustin Hellberg (issue 8) has an MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop and a PhD from EGS, Switzerland. His novel, *Squirrel Haus*, came out this year and he has a forthcoming poetry book, *A Perfect Sphere on a Frictionless Plane*, and a book of criticism, *World Enough*, due out soon. Other poems have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Gut Cult*, *Past Simple*, *2 River*, *eratio*, *Spork* and elsewhere. He has several articles forthcoming on Charles Peirce, evolutionary aesthetics, Cormac McCarthy and other topics. He is an assistant professor and lives in Seoul. He would also like to recommend the poetry books of three authors, Gabriella Torres, Lauren Haldeman, and Jim Goar, because they are excellent poets and their work moves him to outright jealousy.

**Transom:**

Your poem, "Uselessness," ends with a pregnant animal and the speaker, "too close to the ground/to be truly noted or fall." Is it more useful to be noted, or to fall?

**Hellberg:**

Neither is preferable. That was the aim of the poem, to parallel the speaker with a relatively 'useless animal – a scavenger and pest that still has a job to do: give birth. The speaker thus would have some small purpose, though what that is the poem doesn't need to say. At the time I wrote the poem I was moving around quite a bit in the western US, mostly working as a carpenter or remodeling houses. I certainly didn't feel worthy of note, but it was an honest life. It kept me from falling too far. I saw this particular raccoon in Utah and I hope she's well.

**Transom:**

The syntax of your poem leaves open the possibility that the “mother swollen/soon to birth” could either be the starving raccoon or the blue koi. Is the distinction between predator and prey important in this poem?

**Hellberg:**

I tried to let the lines act as punctuation for the poem which is a very loose sonnet, a form I've been writing in almost exclusively now for years. I am not sure I'd call a raccoon a predator, though. I don't consider the koi prey either. There is just a strange security being at the bottom of any 'chain' (food, hierarchy, etc.) in that you can't really topple down much lower and you're hopefully under the radar of any authorities (predators, debtors, etc.). Then again, you can always be a little lower, like the koi. Or at least that was the thought I had in mind when I wrote this particular poem. Sometimes you eat the raccoon (I don't recommend it) and sometimes the raccoon eats you, I guess.

10/28

It's gnarly this animal smell I have.  
Don't worry,  
my body is a gnarly factory.

I think  
you are safe in there,  
fur and whiskers, paws and a cobweb  
of blood warping my body for a bit.

I set down my claw-cup. This is your cabin,  
you mark it like a cat. Inside my belly  
your purr gains frequency –  
at night the entire bed grunts with your  
hooves and maw warmth. Or

you feel like a spider I'm not afraid of.  
Soft. Made of cloth,  
not math. And after an evening

of gathering primrose & burdock,  
I chew leaves to make you an internal bath.  
Everywhere is the smell of feral  
wolf; the underneaths of a dog tail.

Wait – that's me I'm smelling.

## The One About Firs Phen Telling You to Enter Your Body Again

Feeling bad forever and then

it is finished: no more feeling bad.

So you walk to the spruce section of the timber floor.

Carrying

a palm leaf, you transfer a small fire. It is  
six o'clock, the owls & children.

So many light green beads. A sweatshirt

with a flower on it. Firs Phen appears, she says

Hey. She says You must

learn to fall

into your body over & over again, like you did the first time

when you were an alien.

She brings stones to your inner head: amber, lime green,

one like fruit tea.

A whole nation changes  
currency on the other side of the world.  
For a moment

you can see mothers everywhere,  
mist bundles ... amber plumes ...

faces between saplings.

Ask me

what you are afraid of, she says. Just ask.

05/16

Child, you tried to french-kiss our cat and it was disgusting.  
I wanted to cry out on the way home from the store.

A calendar could have told me the multiple wheels  
have aligned for the feeling of trapped lion inside.

Motherhood is zoology – the hut of smells,  
the paw-closeness; it fur it teeth it dirt.

A chapter of your face pasted hard on the  
chapter of mine. Motherhood written

as mortar and wood. The sparkling mish-mash  
ball of all-feeling, the static electric of feeling things.

I am trying to picture how you will look  
instead of seeing how you look now. You look like you will.

08/08

At last, the database emerges from the forest,  
ivy-laden, gold with its particulars of data-storage

and floating grid. I call to it “send help”  
& its drawers release a little unicode sheep –

cute as a mountain, barnacled with smells of  
clover and the tributary. A rain

of silver numbers wafts across the sea.

Stillness then, for seven minutes  
in which the database is empty. I inch up

& look into its clear structure.  
what is it exactly – a single moment? A nebula entry?

**11/24**

Everything was loud: the TV was loud, the kitchen was loud, the yelling was loud, the loud was loud – you took your head out of the loud, you went outdoors & touched the small tree still crutched by its support wires & amber tape & gum-tack & you breathe. You take a deep breath. Out to the dinky interstate adjacent to the new housing development there is no wilderness, except look down – you'll find a jaguar in the palm of your hand.

09/15

On the porch  
A juice glass sits  
Full of leaf reflections

Lean your thoughts upon it  
Feel the animals

A dolphin and a bat inside  
Lime green, dark gleam  
In their stomachs drops of sun

The moist chorus of bone  
Verily put it down  
That resplendent juice put it in you

Where eerily grows up a palm tree  
Of rhombuses reflecting

What simple argument exists  
In the structure of the palm

One moment it is vacant  
Blinking  
A small hotel of wind

Lauren Haldeman (issue 8)'s first poetry collection, *Calenday*, is out from Rescue Press. She works as a web developer and web designer for several websites, including the Writing University website at the University of Iowa and the Iowa Review. She received her M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and has been a finalist for the Walt Whitman award and the Colorado Prize for Poetry. Also: She's a mom and makes paintings. Find her at <http://laurenhaldeman.com>.

**Transom:**

In one reading, this is a sequence of dark poems about motherhood. On the other hand, lines like "Wait—that's me I'm smelling" open the door to humor. Is mother humor also black humor?

**Haldeman:**

Great question! I love the idea of "mother humor" – you've coined a phrase I think. And yes, I think "mother humor" is so often black humor, mostly because black humor is a basic survival technique. It is something that comes from an experience of extreme stress and trauma and unknowing and it changes the perspective of the experience, makes it funny. It re-routes the power. And the comedy in so many of the poems in *Calenday* came out of that same mode of survival. Like: if I don't make this funny, then the weight of it is going to sink me. So yes, black humor.

But “mother humor” also comes out of a deep need to communicate. When I first had my daughter, there was this silence (at least it seemed to me, at first) in the public discussion about what becoming a mother really meant. There was this way that everyone used symbols and metaphors which completely glassed over the experience. I don’t know if this is to protect the idea of motherhood as sacred, or something else, but the silence was, for me, very damaging. I wasn’t experiencing motherhood the way that the cards and the commercials said I would. So I felt wrong. I felt flawed. And so when I tried to articulate this to other people, I often used humor to buffer the blow of what I was saying. Like, instead of saying “I am afraid I’m not going to survive this,” or “I am afraid I am intrinsically a bad mother” I would instead talk about how smelly I was. At first. But now I am much more honest with people about how hard motherhood is, how animalistic it is at first – about how odd and confusing one’s feelings can be after the baby is born. Why am I more honest now? Well, mostly because I started to find (through continually talking/joking to people about it, for four years now) that almost every mother – almost every parent – feels this way, at some point or another. Lost. Scared. Lonely. Failing. These aren’t abnormal feelings; these aren’t even rare. And it shouldn’t be shameful to talk about them. And you know what? Talking honestly about them began to save me. The honesty actually made me a better mother. More confident, more empathetic, more kind.

**Transom:**

In your poem, “5/16,” the slippage of “motherhood” to “mortar” and “wood” suggests to us a corresponding slippage of identity. Do you think such linguistic play reflects the “real-time” experience of motherhood?

**Haldeman:**

There is a loss of identity in becoming a parent, yes, but there is also a loss of humanness too, especially for the mother. You are forced back into really base elements of nature, of animal: hence, “mortar” “wood.” I really just felt like an animal during that first year. It wasn’t a bad thing, per se, but it was shocking. I would be laying in my bed, early in the morning, feeding my daughter, surrounded by just wetness. And I remember thinking, “I don’t even know what kind of bodily fluid this wetness is.” It was a big mess. There was milk (coming from my body, by the way), and my daughter was drooling and peeing and pooping, like a newborn does. And her pee and poop would leak out of her diaper and get in all the awful places. And there was sweat, because we were bodies doing real live work. There were tears so often too. There was all this ... just ... liquid. It was so animal. And no matter how much we tried to civilize the experience (washing the linens, vacuuming, laundering, bathing, cleaning) it just kept coming back: milk, sweat, urine, tears, saliva, poop. So, in writing about it, I liked the linguistic play, the slippage, because there was this similarly slippery play between being human and being animal in our house, between civilization and nature. The lines were blurry.

**Transom:**

“08/08” reminds us of poems in the pastoral tradition – there is a sheep, and clover, and other elements of the natural landscape. But your pastoral has a decidedly digital edge: “a rain/of silver numbers wafts across the sea.” Is the digital landscape the new pastoral?

**Haldeman:**

I have always loved the collision of man-made and nature. When I was a kid, my brother tried to saw down a tree with a hubcap. It didn’t work and he actually badly cut his finger in the process, but the image of the hubcap, stuck halfway into the tree, really stayed with me. Over time the tree actually grew around the hubcap. It incorporated it. I feel like we do that too, with technology. I mean, think about it: technology itself is pretty limited. A computer is essentially just a bunch of electronic switches that are either on (1) or off (0). At its most basic fundamental level, computer programming – the binary 1s and 0s – is not human. It is math. It is cold and rigid and strict.

But the very next thing we do with it is make a language for it. We translate.

And then all the magic happens. We do this because we are human. We

humanize the digital. The digital doesn’t start out that way. We add to it. And I

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**Transom:**

These poems are from your new book, *Calenday*, and almost all of these titles are dates. Are these poems artifacts of a daily writing practice?

**Haldeman:**

They are! So, after I had Ellie, I basically freaked out. I thought "My writing life is over. My artistic life is over." But then I remembered what John McPhee said about his process: he wrote for a set amount of time each day. It was a short amount of time, really, but that over the months it added up. And I thought I could try something like that. So I bought this set of tiny Moleskin notebooks that were supposed to be used as little daily planners. I decided to write in them every day. The pages were so small. They were only big enough for about 4-5 sentences. So I wasn't writing very much each day. Hardly anything at all, actually. But they eventually added up.

It is funny, because at the end of that year I had 365 of these tiny pages, but so many of the pages were total crap. One page was basically me writing the word “Angry” over and over. On other pages, I wrote about mundane things: going to the store, having acne, cleaning the house, being tired. But, once and while, there would suddenly be this whole page of poetry! And that happened enough times to make a book.

I do not have to be a wild creature to run away from the cricket inside myself.

I sail to an island. I am facing the wind and the strings are silenced.

My grandfather appears eyeless. In dreams, skin grows

from under his eyebrows and over his nostrils and he glows.

If I am clutching bialy and a slab of salt, he nods and dissolves

like sugar cubes, like pop rocks. That was last year. Twelfth grade,

have you forgotten what a star looks like? A small fisherman of a devastated craft

cupping sea water and wetting his lips. Birdwatchers hold him

in their binoculars. He can't be that sea bird. No one knows his arms;

however frail, they only hang from their sockets.

## Out

I built my trousseau and there was no one to help move it from my bedroom. I gave up, slept on the floor for the rest of my life and at 28 went out and shut the door to that room.

Outside, neighborhood kids threw pennies at me like I was a fountain for their wishes: Take my acne; Kevin, Kevin; Set me afire.

Lonely people were once parceled into asylums. Now a world of individuals skates down Shank Painter Road finally out, finally a good place to park their cars and let the dogs run out onto the Atlantic beaches and shit.

## Tintypes

Under the blossoming peach trees, hogs fell on the dead in Shiloh. I am breaking up with you and there is a yellow-hatted man throwing apples. Union soldier? Rebel? I can't be held responsible for my actions. I use my fists when I should cry like a woman in love. Already the peach trees are shaken by a breeze. Already the hogs roll over to sleep like large, uncorseted women in a brothel. We were going to sip old-fashioneds and face the ocean. We were going to slip into the water with all our gold. This war was never meant to be ours. Remember

////

I can't cry the tears the ghosts cry all over themselves. You don't write me. In Philadelphia, you remember me in spite of yourself. At the heart of every translation is: How could you go ahead of me when I loved you so? No reconnaissance to return your words to your mouth. Whales, adrift with harpoons of another era.

## Gift Horse

My enemies give me gifts I do not need: calves' foot jelly,  
decorative spoons, a baby's bib that reads, God's Girl.

It is far from the moon, this uselessness. It's a trilobite. It's two cats  
suspended in pitchy whale song. The gifts (framed two-dollar bill,  
wet sheet music) – Everything as it should be, it all seems to say.

Be happy, a set of cloth napkins reads. In blue.

Jess Feldman (issue 8)'s poems have appeared in Painted Bride Quarterly, The Portland Review, Tuesday; An Art Project, Sun's Skeleton, and elsewhere. She blogs about her quilting life on The Gift Fox. Jess lives in Queens with Mike Luz and their tiger tabby, Willicus.

**Transom:**

The image of “whales adrift with harpoons of another era” reminded us of a similar moment in Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Fish.” If the pieces of fishing line in the Bishop poem comprise “a five-haired beard of wisdom,” then are your whales similarly wise?

**Feldman:**

“Wise” can be a tricky word. I’d say Bishop’s fish is more lucky; after all, even she releases him back into the water rather than a skillet. Way up North, certain Bowhead whales have been discovered with harpoons still lodged in them, making these creatures well over a hundred years old and, I’d say, damn lucky. We might say that they’ve “wised up,” since now they are very reclusive, human-shy creatures. I am most interested in the idea of the paper (or hook & harpoon) trails that we humans leave. Is it a comfort that we can follow ourselves backwards? Does this mean that we are never lost?

**Transom:**

As editors who are older than 28, we must admit that we laughed when we read the line, “I gave up/slept on the floor for the rest of my life and at 28/ went out.” The voice that would speak this line seems full of innocence to us. Does the poem mourn or celebrate such innocence?

**Feldman:**

It’s more like this poem signals a new phase of innocence as it is ushered in. I never saw myself as a person in the world past the age of 28; it seemed like the edge of the universe. Now that I’m 30, I’m entering even more uncharted territory, just like those sister Voyager spacecraft at the very edge of our galaxy and still pushing onward.

**Transom:**

Looking a gift horse in the mouth is a good way to make enemies of friends, but in “Gift Horse,” the givers already are enemies. In this context, how important is it for anyone to be “polite” in this poem?

**Feldman:**

To me, these enemies are just about the worst. Instead of giving you the opportunity to fight, they hand you crappy gifts. And what do you say to that? No, thank you? Confession: I have a soft spot for the Disney movie, Pollyanna, the one with Hayley Mills. Pollyanna is sent on do-gooding business for her aunt, and has to take a basket filled with calves’ foot jelly to crotchety Mrs. Snow. Mrs. Snow is the epitome of someone burdened by the many gifts of enemies. She doesn’t smile when handed that basket. Mrs. Snow winces, she frowns. That basket is a world of heavy in her arms. If only we could all have the courage to be so honest.

**Transom:**

In “19,” the speaker and other figures struggle to “hold” or “clutch” things. In the final image, the fisherman’s arms “only hang from their sockets,” making them unrecognizable. If something has to be held in order to be known, then why does the speaker run away from the “cricket” that is contained in her own body?

**Feldman:**

People within this poem clutch or escape to something tactile in moments of incredulity. Faced with bizarre truths (i.e. voice of conscience/“cricket,” apparition of loved one, castaway discovered by vacationers), that which they hold acts as a fulcrum of sorts. The object (boat, bialy, binoculars) grants them the foolhardy ability to negate what they see. I don’t blame them for that. Who hasn’t wished to dismantle the truth in order to find a place of peace?

**[In a time clot]**

In a time clot, mother dabs her cream-lit face & goes on smiting limes into the carafe. She has returned from her voyage and the only diamond I have is not to her liking.

Her tin muse hangs from exposed beams, all legs and arms and Venus hair.

Mother is sun bait. In summer, she tamed bales into splitting. She was all crammed heat and a mouthful of needles. She was a space to insert a smart mare. Now she bears her carapace on the meat table, a turning spit under a staggering sun.

Today she excuses herself from the solution. She spins the cord around her neck and tightens; dials a number from her own payphone in her own foyer. I wait patiently for my refreshment, toting my lint. Mother's ringing begins like rain, but nothing is like rain.

deborah brandon (issue 8) lives in Tucson and holds an MFA in Writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Additional work appears in Ocho, MiPOesias, [PANK], Bombay Gin, Mom Egg Review, Denver Quarterly, Moonshot, Hotel Amerika, Cadillac Cicatrix, Puerto del Sol, Slipstream, and Evergreen Chronicles; and the anthology Writing the Walls Down, published by TransGenre press.

**Transom:**

The final sentence of this poem offers a simile to describe the mother and then immediately rejects the possibility of that simile. Is the mother fundamentally unknowable?

**brandon:**

The mother is, at once, inescapable – so vast she has seeped into the speaker’s entire world – and completely unreachable.

**Transom:**

The verbs used to describe the mother (“smiting,” “taming,” etc.) place her within an epic register, while the speaker occupies a decidedly less lofty space of “toting lint” and insufficient jewels. Is the speaker necessarily reduced in the shadow of such a figure?

**brandon:**

Yes, if you think of reduction in the sense of distillation. You're right, the mother exists within an epic register; not just in this poem, but in the entire book (A Botany of Limbs) from which it is excerpted. In the liminal space of gender transition, the speaker is reduced to himself. & he has his own, differently epic, but very much badass register.

## second song

found by the side of a ditch in the middle of june, p.  
is as pretty as a peach & he believes in leaves

& marriage, too. we riddle what brings to us the joys  
of the domestic; we deduce that our hearts generate

as much eat as a salad  
in the spring. they write

to each other à la folio. we are of age –  
whatever glory or melancholy it brings

& we sing. when dandelions make us piss  
pearl, we know it is the greatest part

of the summer. we hang a root from our child's neck  
during teething & our child will thank us when he is calmer.

Hannah Lipper (issue 8), originally from New Jersey, is currently an undergraduate at Bennington College studying psychology and poetry. She is graduating in December 2014 and starting her graduate program at Boston University's School of Public Health in January. Her work has previously appeared in *The Silo*, Bennington's student-run journal of arts and letters.

**Transom:**

Your poem seems to celebrate the arrival of a future: "we are of age." But it ends still looking forward: "our child will thank us when he is calmer." Both statements are made with certainty. Can we know the future before it becomes the present?

**Lipper:**

I am a proponent of planning. I'd like to think I incorporate certainty into much of my work, even among statements or images that are intangible. In this poem, I was very much preoccupied with the idea of physical things occurring without having any context or making any actual sense. I wondered what it would be like to have major life events, like marriage and childbirth, occur so instantaneously, without heartbreak or amniotic fluid. The romanticizing of societal expectations is a theme I like playing with (and distorting).

**Transom:**

We wonder what it means to "piss pearl." It sounds like an undesirable effect, but in the poem, the speaker takes it as a sign that "it is the greatest part of summer."

**Lipper:**

I really enjoy the poetic conceit of flowers. However, I have a fear of being ultra-feminine and wanted to slightly warp this poem through the use of a semi-unpleasant word: piss. I also wanted to contrast the modernity of this word with the more arcane language in the text as I used a book about plants and flowers published in the 1730s as inspiration. I was interested in the idea of only seeing the end-product of a situation. We never see or hear of the formation of the pearl. Regardless of how it was created, we can enjoy it for its aesthetic beauty. The creation of the pearl (a child) is also a testament to the innocence/naiveté of the couple.

**Transom:**

Your poem demonstrates a great deal of sonic play. We are struck by the proliferation of “p,” “b,” and long “e” sounds. If this is a “second song,” is there a “first song?” Are you guided by music?

**Lipper:**

There was never a first song! This is primarily because I wanted the title to convey a femininity through the soft “s” sounds (although maybe I was also subconsciously influenced by the TV On The Radio song). I also wanted the title to jump to this particular scene – one that lacks any complexity.

I grew up in a household that played “Sketches of Spain” by Miles Davis on the regular. I’m often influenced by jazz, hip-hop, folk, etc., and typically try to incorporate musicality into the poems that I want to be playful. I’m drawn to work that plays with sounds, like that of Monica Youn or Brenda Shaughnessy.

## Postscript: To Missy Walker

as well there is  
a song of swans  
surrounds me &  
of darkness a  
developing edge  
in the plotless  
wild ravening  
of swans are you  
out there weird  
trill I sing  
toward are you  
out there outline  
of dying my  
torso traces the  
harmonics of there  
are nights that  
carve my voice  
to froths of  
absolution I  
admit I've asked  
each night to  
sing since the  
first night &  
in the grid of  
your not granting  
I hear such  
silence as fills  
forgiveness what  
does it mean  
to abandon a  
feeling in the constant

sound of time to  
wake in blue  
clusters of hours  
without moving  
to give up  
control of  
desire as you  
might give up  
control of a car  
on the bridge one  
night I am  
walking out let's  
say for infant  
tylenol from  
the Family Dollar  
& in my skin  
a caustic like  
I've become  
a graft of  
someone else's  
sensation onto  
the surface of  
this instant's  
absolving song  
& how could I  
have let it  
come to this  
I am let's say  
in need of  
the flagrant  
far-flung rage of  
swans condensed &  
welling up  
to contradict

this dark  
it's there  
between desire  
& devastation an  
alien signal awake  
in the story's  
alternating current  
beyond who  
am I how did I  
get here what  
could it mean to  
walk beside any  
particular  
other absorbing  
the city's chemical  
dose & call  
this constantly  
brimming we are  
what poetry's  
for it's stupid  
to act that  
way who could  
be so easily  
fooled "I forget  
what the only  
sin is" says  
Eileen Myles but  
surely it must  
be to harbor  
trust in the world  
when desire in  
the body of  
the world exists  
for what who

cares for love  
or music or  
annihilation &  
once it exists  
to silence it is  
the richest  
absence of hour  
in which there is  
no event  
but waiting  
this  
stasis is if  
anything is  
divine it is  
what keeps me  
alive in the  
tide of each  
hour believing  
the edge of  
night emerging  
in me is the thrust  
into tomorrow  
that never  
sings & this  
is one of the  
stories about the  
body that never  
thereafter  
shifts & must be  
forgiven so this  
is the moment  
when someone  
makes me confess  
that fundamentally

I have no faith  
in the world this is  
the moment when  
I'm forced to  
admit that "I  
swim in the silent  
events of my  
skin" without  
resistance but  
Cassie has asked  
for a story beyond  
desire & devastation  
she's asked for  
a story about  
a shift in human  
behavior of which  
there's just one  
I know  
a woman for  
many years has  
lived inside  
the insistency of  
a pattern with  
her lovers it  
brings her tremendous  
pain to recognize  
after several  
months or years  
of integrating her  
life with each  
lover's the pattern  
imprinting itself  
irrevocably once  
again her lover is

in every case a  
sensitive & brilliant  
but emotionally  
damaged man who  
has been seeking  
for many years  
a woman to  
wrap his life  
around & she  
imagines she will  
guide him beyond  
his troubles into  
a realized  
personality which  
includes her &  
she does so but  
each time she finds  
just when her  
desires appear  
in this manner  
justified they  
awaken in somebody  
new somebody  
much like her  
lover used to  
be & so it  
goes until broken  
momentarily  
free of the diagram  
enclosing her  
story she visits  
an old friend  
for the weekend  
& falls unexpectedly

but entirely  
in love she  
knows at once this  
love is not like  
the others knows  
that the pattern has  
unstitched itself  
from her heart & so  
she marries  
her friend & so  
emerges into  
a calm that  
does not even  
shake at the  
edges at night  
not one bit & to  
the maintenance  
of this calm she  
devotes herself  
completely for  
awhile everything  
is & seems to be  
a form she can  
learn to furnish  
differently for  
different visitors  
& in the hymn  
projecting from  
total direction into  
each lived instant  
she waits  
tilting subtly  
forward from the  
edge of a cushion

as though about to  
reach into the room  
& lift a mug of  
coffee that isn't  
there if later she  
gives birth to  
a child if later  
she returns to  
school to complete  
her dissertation no one  
will have noted  
this drift while it  
occurred or whether  
in the effortless  
current that filters  
time outside of  
time from the  
line of difference  
events accrete  
along she has  
discerned that this  
is not the shift  
the story is  
about some years  
pass before  
one day in the  
pick-up line for  
daycare or out  
to coffee she  
falls in love a  
final time  
& hopelessly  
with a man much  
younger than

her who by  
an incidental  
gesture reveals  
his heart as the  
absent half of  
her own a mirror  
to what of her  
was somewhere  
asleep in the steady  
incantation of songs  
& afternoons her life  
is thrown into  
crisis she can't  
complete ordinary  
motions can't hold  
a colander steady  
start the car  
sing her child  
to sleep & yet  
her nights & days  
incompletely but  
her love for her  
husband entirely  
remain intact this  
is the unattached  
root of a profound  
confusion stretching  
each afternoon  
toward clarity  
which she accepts  
into the calm of her  
formal parlor but  
at night while her  
child & husband

sleep she walks  
out into the city  
along a circuit of  
ever-widening &  
more unwieldy  
loops which  
she begins to  
believe would  
chart if viewed  
from above a  
plot from which  
she could not  
escape a  
graph of the  
ventricles &  
veins wrapped  
around & entering  
into her heart  
as the image  
takes hold she  
walks past shops  
& restaurants &  
lines of cars  
parked diagonally  
on silent arterial  
streets consumed  
by the thought  
of color lines  
tracing her path  
each night an  
ephemeral map  
of contrasts are  
you out there  
you hey

you  
she imagines each  
night's turning  
point to be  
a kind of  
station like  
the circles that  
mark the stops  
on a subway map  
a station or  
terminus that  
tethers the reds &  
lavenders of her  
route & at each  
she would like  
to leave  
a remnant a  
token some  
haphazard shrine  
anyone passing  
would not remark  
upon a playing  
card say with  
someone's name  
across the back  
or a foreign coin  
fastened with  
transparent tape  
to a signpost as  
soon as she begins  
to leave these  
shrines indeed she  
discovers she  
believes other

shrines abandoned  
in apparent reply  
& sometimes  
preceding her own  
so that she  
no longer is sure  
whether the project  
originated in  
her asking after  
her conjured  
lover or whether  
she was the  
respondent to  
someone else's  
asking surely  
his & here  
she feels the plot  
dissolving she  
perceives that  
there's both no  
hope & no  
purpose in  
carrying the  
project any  
further when  
already the idea  
of response fills  
her waiting with  
almost unbearable  
depth & just then  
looking up she  
finds she has  
walked much  
further from home

than she'd thought  
she has entered  
a district of the  
city that is unfamiliar  
to her & she will  
not be able she  
knows to return  
by dawn & not  
even attempting to  
untangle the trace  
of her direction she  
walks until reaching  
a playground or  
bus transfer  
station or construction  
site she places  
the last of her  
shrines &  
lies down  
to sleep  
she has  
this dream  
she is seated  
at an outdoor  
table on a cold  
day she is dressed  
in a warm gray  
overcoat & red  
scarf she is  
waiting for a  
friend when  
her daughter  
appears in the  
seat across from

her & though she  
herself has not  
aged her daughter  
is fully grown  
she is happy  
to see her &  
clasps her hands  
across the table  
“insofar as we  
exist” she  
says “we exist  
in others our  
condition is only  
desire & in it  
we wait or we  
wait & forgive  
the waiting & in  
forgiveness find  
our waiting has  
split in two” she  
drops her daughter's  
hands “all experience”  
she continues “is  
change & this  
condition  
demands endless  
forgiveness I've  
wished I was  
an addict so as  
to more meaningfully  
forgive addiction  
but there are yes  
there are limits  
to love I've wished

I was a christian  
so as to feel the  
absolute relief  
of forgiveness  
flood my being but  
forgiveness is not  
as in the church  
contingent  
forgiveness is total  
& precedes any  
need for it  
like the self it is  
plotless & arrives  
charged with refusal”  
as she speaks she  
watches herself  
speak & feels herself  
diminishing toward  
sleep's essential  
relinquishment but  
she says “there are  
instants that shake  
at all times within  
this waiting & it's  
preposterous to  
tell you this but  
in these instants I exist  
completely & yes  
I've wished to  
emerge into them  
into a lifetime  
of this” & she flips  
the hood of her  
coat up so it

frames her face  
& she smiles  
the clarity of  
her expression  
startles her &  
she wakes  
it is midday &  
warm the weather  
has shifted the  
preceding night's  
chill has dissolved  
discerning that she  
is mere blocks  
from the university  
she walks the rest  
of the distance  
perplexed as to how  
she could last night  
have perceived  
herself as lost  
the motion of  
the story is  
inexorable  
from here there  
is little need  
for elaboration  
at the university  
she meets the man  
who has split  
unwittingly her  
existence in two  
he asks of course  
to speak for a  
minute with her it's

impossible he  
says with reference  
to her husband &  
child but he's  
deeply perhaps  
indecently in love  
with her & though  
she's anticipated  
this moment like  
she's anticipated  
each potential  
encounter with him  
she is nevertheless  
overwhelmed  
& for a few  
moments she  
cannot reply  
then she asks  
will he come with  
her for a walk  
& he agrees  
she describes  
at length  
her desire for  
him & how this  
desire while  
secret has come  
to seem welcome  
to her even  
necessary but that  
in order for this  
to be true all must  
remain as it is  
already that he

impossible he  
says with reference  
to her husband &  
child but he's  
deeply perhaps  
indecently in love  
with her & though  
she's anticipated  
this moment like  
she's anticipated  
each potential  
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will he come with  
her for a walk  
& he agrees  
she describes  
at length  
her desire for  
him & how this  
desire while  
secret has come  
to seem welcome  
to her even  
necessary but that  
in order for this  
to be true all must  
remain as it is  
already that he

must live hereafter  
quietly for her &  
she for him & that  
though she knows  
this will make  
of their lives a  
kind of ruin she  
hopes they both  
can find in the  
endlessness of  
that ruin the true  
& total richness  
of existence &  
having said so  
she turns  
& kisses him  
gently once  
on the mouth &  
then she turns  
again & walks  
to her home  
Cassie  
Missy this  
patience is  
life essentially  
it trembles there  
like the swan's  
implacable anger  
it makes a sort  
of tremolo of  
the air the force  
of which drives  
song down  
under the

soil but it  
can't be  
forgiven our  
bones were not  
given to us  
to hold the  
bitter surplus  
of that music  
what then  
is the price  
what then is  
the price you're  
willing to pay  
because death  
also is a kind of  
surplus the dead  
take so much  
so much grain so  
much lace so much  
nautical rope they  
keep paint in jars  
they take shirts  
down from shelves  
they take books they  
take words out of  
speech we're left  
parsed & so  
sing can't they  
leave us a  
song do they  
need all the  
songs but the  
music remaining's  
a rasp that won't

sleep in my  
mouth full of  
weather & distance  
& blossoming  
murderous  
blood that  
surges with  
shattering pale  
inconsolable  
desire this  
cold night of  
tenderly walking  
down long clear  
streets named  
for generals & I  
know we are not  
each other's  
medicine or  
anything sparing  
the body I  
know we are not  
anything left  
to rely on I  
don't know what  
medicine's for  
that doesn't come  
broken from  
the body  
broken & not  
flush with  
whatever the  
body holds  
that requires  
forgiving & as

for forgiveness  
in fact you're  
forgiven you're  
all forgiven I am  
obliterated by  
the darkness &  
the quiet & the  
fear in each  
of you that is  
a mirror of  
you in me  
& ensures you'll  
never be the  
next to die  
before me from  
this instant  
spilling out  
into night  
forgiveness is  
a geometric  
phrase that  
forms a network  
vibrant around  
what light  
remains  
between us  
that is a shifting  
center we turn  
toward tune  
toward who  
leads me who  
leads me  
now streets  
empty as a  
boot distant

TRANSOM ISSUE 8: ANDY STALLINGS

headwater coming  
somewhere blue  
as nothing I can  
hold outside  
division  
common factor  
of a tissue  
thin as grief  
you now double  
approaching  
communion of  
seed of soil &  
given this  
light & the  
velocity of  
its rinse we  
live I lose  
I live through  
love I give  
by love I  
have so  
much to  
give so  
much &  
giving  
love so  
much I  
have so  
much so  
much I  
have such  
love I  
have so

much I  
have such  
love to  
give

Andy Stallings (issue 1, issue 8) lives in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and teaches at Deerfield Academy. His first book, *To the Heart of the World*, is out in fall 2014 from Rescue Press.

**Transom:**

This poem, from your new collection, *To the Heart of the World*, is by far the longest poem we've ever published in *Transom*. It begins in medias res and ends with a seeming collapse of language. How did you decide on the path the poem would take through the page?

**Stallings:**

To be honest, this poem nearly ruined me. I had written another of *To the Heart of the World's* key poems, "To Carolyn Blessing," to read at the Ten Gallery in New Orleans last November, in what was for reasons I don't really understand the most intense reading I ever hope to give. I realized after that reading that, while "To Carolyn Blessing" was absolutely complete, I had more to say on the matter. So this poem began as a postscript, eventually titled "Postscript: To Missy Walker." The fact of its being a postscript accounts for the poem's opening syntax. And I thought I was writing a really short poem – but it kept unfolding and unfolding, against my wishes. Over a period of nearly two weeks, I got completely lost in that poem, and basically lost touch with all other aspects of my life. This is of course what I've always wanted from poetry – the necessity of complete abandon – but in actual life the impact was not so positive. I'm a husband and a father, and while it's not really possible to abdicate from those responsibilities without hurting Melissa and the kids, that's what I did in order to write the poem. I didn't really feel like I had a choice. And it's that abdication from the real responsibility of my life that led to the breakdown of language that, finally, ended the poem. I was glad to get there. And poetry really can change who you are.

**Transom:**

This poem presents itself as a private address to one person, Missy Walker. Is the reader an eavesdropper in this poem?

**Stallings:**

This is one of the occasions on which the premise of the private address is a lie. The title claims Missy as a listener, but the vast majority of the poem is addressed to my friend Cassie Donish, and both Missy and Cassie bring in, each, a handful of other anonymous listeners, specific or implied. None of this is intended as an obfuscation: as I said above, the poem began as one thing, and ended as another entirely. The title came when it was still a very short poem. My ideal relationship of reader to title is something along the lines of an imaginary walking companion -- someone both with and not with me as I walk and talk -- and the person addressed by the title is simply the first absent walker.

**Transom:**

The name "Missy" appears just once in the poem, about four-fifths of the way through, after a series of absorbing digressions. Is Missy Walker the anchor of this poem?

**Stallings:**

She's one of them. She is actually nowhere in the poem -- there is nothing about Missy in the poem, and nothing about my relationship to Missy in the poem (worth noting, given the poem's main themes and the fact that Missy was a student of mine at Tulane). So, there's no sense in which she's a narrative anchor of the poem. But the poem would not be what it is, would perhaps have never gotten past its earliest lines, if I hadn't imagined Missy as a listener. Others entered into my conception of listening at other times, but I suppose Missy remained, not the poem's anchor, but its horizon, until the poem ended.

**Transom:**

The beginning of the poem compares the speaker to a swan in compelling yet contradictory language: "a developing/edge in the plotless/wild ravening/of swans," and the "weird trill/I sing toward." Is it fair to read this poem as a swan song?

**Stallings:**

If you mean “swan song” in the colloquial sense, well, yes, it very nearly was a kind of swan song. The poem left me in a very bad place personally. And, also, it wound up the book’s swan song, unintentionally. But I think you might mean something a little different. I think you might be asking whether it’s so deeply rooted in the animal, bodily fact of living that it’s like a swan’s actual song. And I have to say, to my chagrin, that it is not. It’s ultimately way too controlled for that. I wish I were more a swan than I am.